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OO RUEHBC RUEHDA RUEHDE RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #0578/01 0641707
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 051707Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2009
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE
RHMFISS/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000578

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SUBJECT: IRAQ'S MINORITIES

REF: A. 07 BAGHDAD 2682

[B](#). 08 BAGHDAD 3590

[C](#). 08 BAGHDAD 1848

[D](#). 08 BAGHDAD 3489

[E](#). 08 BAGHDAD 3926

[F](#). 08 BAGHDAD 1962

[G](#). 08 BAGHDAD 2096

[H](#). 08 BAGHDAD 1830

(U) This is the second in a series of messages intended to provide background for policy-makers on Iraq.

[1](#). (U) Summary: Iraq's minorities have a long and colorful history in the "Land Between the Two Rivers." While their numbers have declined significantly in recent years, those who remain contribute significantly to the cultural and political fabric of Iraq. Most minority communities are located in the north, where they have resided in one form or another since biblical times. Christians make up the largest minority group in Iraq, followed by Yezidis, Shabaks, Sabaeen-Mandaeans, Baha'is and a handful of Jews. All of these groups are subject to harassment and abuse, though the GOI has recently taken steps to mitigate attacks targeting minorities. The USG is committed to promoting religious freedom and minority rights in Iraq and provides significant financial and political support to minority groups. Many USG-sponsored NGOs work closely with Iraq's minorities, assisting them on a wide variety of issues. End summary.

Iraq's Minorities: A Snapshot

[2](#). (U) Ninety-five percent of Iraq's 28.2 million citizens are Muslim. Shi'a Muslims -- predominantly Arabs, but also including Turkmen, Faili Kurds and other groups -- constitute a 60 to 65% majority. Sunni Muslims make up 32 to 37% of the population; of these, 18 to 20% of the national population are Kurds and one to two percent are Turkmen. The remaining five percent of the population is comprised of Christians, Yezidis, Shabaks, Sabaeen-Mandaeans, Baha'is, and a very small number of Jews. (Note: Due to internal strife, the lack of a comprehensive national census since 1987, and significant internal migration within Iraq and emigration from Iraq, it is difficult to provide completely accurate population numbers for Iraq's minorities. The GOI has recently announced plans to hold a nationwide census in October. End note.)

-- CHRISTIANS: Approximately two-thirds of Iraq's 550,000 to 800,000 Christians are Chaldeans (who follow the Roman Catholic faith), nearly one-third are Assyrians (who subscribe to the "Church of the East"), and the remainder are split among Syriacs (Eastern Orthodox), Armenians (Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox), and a handful of Anglicans and other Protestants. The Chaldean and Syriac populations are

found both in Baghdad and in Iraq's north (in the cities of Kirkuk, Mosul, Erbil and Dohuk and on the Ninewah Plains). Virtually all the Assyrian Christians reside in the north, while the Armenians are spread out among the cities of Baghdad, Basrah, Kirkuk and Mosul. Although some Chaldeans and Assyrians consider themselves Arab, the GOI and the majority of Iraqis consider them to be ethnically distinct from Arabs and Kurds. Armenians have lived in Iraq since before the birth of Christ, and settled in large numbers following attacks on them by the Ottoman Turks in 1915.

- YEZIDIS: There are approximately 500,000 to 600,000 Yezidis residing in Iraq, primarily in and near the northern towns of Dohuk and Mosul. The Yezidi religion is monotheistic and thought to be an offshoot of Zoroastrianism. It includes elements of Manicheism, Zoroastrianism. It includes elements of Manicheism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam and Gnostic beliefs and dates back nearly 4,000 years. Yezidis have been labeled "devil worshippers" by some because of their reverence for Maluk Ta'us, the "Peacock Angel," who, some Muslims and Christians claim, is synonymous with the devil. They have been the target of violent attacks by Al-Qaida in Iraq and other religious extremist groups.
- SHABAKS: Community leaders estimate their population to be between 200,000 to 500,000, though other reports put this number at around 60,000. Almost all Shabaks live in Ninewah Province, primarily in the eastern portions of Mosul. Shabaks combine elements

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of Sufism with their own interpretation of divine reality. Their faith permits the consumption of alcoholic beverages, which results in persecution by some Muslims.

- SABAEAN-MANDAEANS: Approximately 3,000 to 5,000 Sabaeen-Mandaeans live in Iraq, mostly in Baghdad and in the marsh areas of the Ninewah Plains. The Sabaeen or Mandaean (Note: The terms are often used interchangeably. End note.) religion is one of the oldest surviving Gnostic religions in the world and predates Christianity; John the Baptist is its central prophet.
- BAHAI'IS: Fewer than 2,000 Baha'is reside in Iraq; they believe that Baha'u'llah, not Mohammed, was the last prophet, thus putting them directly at odds with the country's majority Muslim population.
- JEWS: Once numbering over 150,000, there are now no more than ten Jews remaining in Iraq, all of whom live in Baghdad. Most of Iraq's Jews fled to Israel following its establishment in 1948 (ref A).

GOI/Minorities: Some Progress But More Necessary

15. (U) Iraqi law guarantees the right of all religious groups to gather and worship freely. In practice, sectarian violence and political instability have impeded the ability of many citizens to exercise this right in full. Iraq's constitution provides for freedom of religion, and while the GOI has generally endorsed this right, many of Iraq's minorities remain targets for persecution by extremist and criminal groups. In addition, radical Islamic elements outside the government continue to exert tremendous pressure on individuals and groups, both within and outside the GOI, to conform to extremist interpretations of Islamic precepts. For example, in October 2008, nearly 2,500 Christian families fled Mosul amid threats by Muslim extremists to convert to

Islam or risk death (refs B and C). Estimates place the number of Christians killed in these attacks at between eight and 15. Many of these families have since returned to their homes, following concerted efforts on the part of the GOI to provide better security for them. The GOI also coordinated with U.S. assistance providers and the UNHCR to provide humanitarian assistance to the displaced Christians during the crisis.

¶6. (U) Over the past year, the GOI has become increasingly aware of the humanitarian challenges faced by minority populations -- as well as the damage these do to international perceptions of Iraq. The GOI particularly wants to stem the embarrassing tide of minority emigration. Prime Minister Maliki has made several supportive public statements affirming that minorities are authentic Iraqis with equal rights. In June 2008 he established a Minorities Committee to protect and advance minorities' socioeconomic and political interests (ref C). Unfortunately, the symbolically important Committee has not been active. Plans to organize a Christian Conference never materialized. In November 2008, parliament voted to amend the Provincial Elections Law to establish six minority set-aside provincial council (one Christian and one Sabaeen seat in Baghdad; one Christian, one Yezidi and one Shabak seat in Ninewah; and one Christian seat in Basrah). The Non-Muslim Endowments Office, which finances the maintenance and restoration of Iraq's non-Muslim places of worship, has sponsored the drafting of a Christian personal status law, currently undergoing review. QChristian personal status law, currently undergoing review following the High Judicial Council's rejection of a previously proposed version (ref E). The Ministry of Finance also approved a large FY09 budget increase for the Non-Muslim Endowments Office. (Note: The GOI maintains three religious endowments ("waqfs"): one Sunni, one Shi'a Endowment, and one for non-Muslims. The endowments, which operate under the authority of the Prime Minister's Office, receive government funding to maintain religious facilities (ref F) End note.)

USG Assistance

¶7. (U) Embassy and PRT officials meet regularly with representatives of all of the country's minority communities. Our primary focus is on increasing minority inclusion in the political process through the passage of key pieces of legislation, such as the amendment to the Provincial Elections Law mentioned above. Since 2003, more than \$31

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million in U.S. assistance funds has been spent on projects with a direct effect on minorities who reside on the Ninewah Plain. These projects include the rebuilding and refurbishing of schools, upgrades to the electrical distribution system, improvements to the local road system and the reconstruction of public service structures such as fire and police stations. In addition, Congress earmarked \$10 million in unobligated FY09 Economic Support Fund money for Iraq to be directed toward projects in the Ninewah Plains region that will improve the lives of thousands of Iraq's minorities.

¶8. (U) A number of U.S.-funded NGOs work closely with Iraq's minorities. The National Democratic Institute works with representatives of the Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) in Mosul, Erbil and Baghdad to educate and train ADM activists and candidates on political party development, campaign management and democratic institutions. The International Republican Institute is currently working on a nationwide effort to remove the "religion" category from Iraqi national ID cards. The International Institute of Law and Human Rights is working with minority groups to develop measures for the implementation of a Ninewah Plain Administrative Unit in accordance with Article 125 of the constitution. If adopted, this would provide some measure of

local administrative control to religious minority
communities residing in Ninewah Province (ref H).
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